

Research Summary



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MONITORING PARK VISITOR REACTIONS TO THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RECREATIONAL FEE DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM: COMPARING REACTIONS OF VISITORS IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK DURING WINTER 2000 AND SUMMER 1999

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Monitoring the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

Under Public Law 104-134 and subsequent amendments, Congress authorized the National Park Service (NPS) to implement a temporary Recreational Fee Demonstration Program to establish new fees or increase existing recreation fees within specified park units. Beginning in 1997, individual parks participating in this program were allowed to keep 80 percent of the fee revenue, with the remaining 20 percent retained by the NPS for distribution to other park units.

During the summer of 1999 and winter of 2000, as part of an ongoing national study to monitor visitor reactions to this program, the University of Minnesota Cooperative Park Studies Program (CPSPP) interviewed visitors at Yellowstone National Park. The NPS, Department of the Interior, and Congress will use the information obtained from visitor interviews for continued evaluation of the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program.

This summary compares the key findings from interviews conducted with visitors during winter 2000 and summer 1999 at Yellowstone National Park (Lime et al. 2000, Lime et al. 1999).

Winter and Summer Visitors Indicate Acceptance of the Demonstration Fees

Overall, the majority of visitors accepted the recreation fees. About 87 percent of all survey respondents in winter 2000 indicated the fees they paid were either "about right" or "too low" (figure 1). Acceptance was higher for summer 1999 visitors with 92 percent of respondents indicating the fees were either "about right" or "too low."

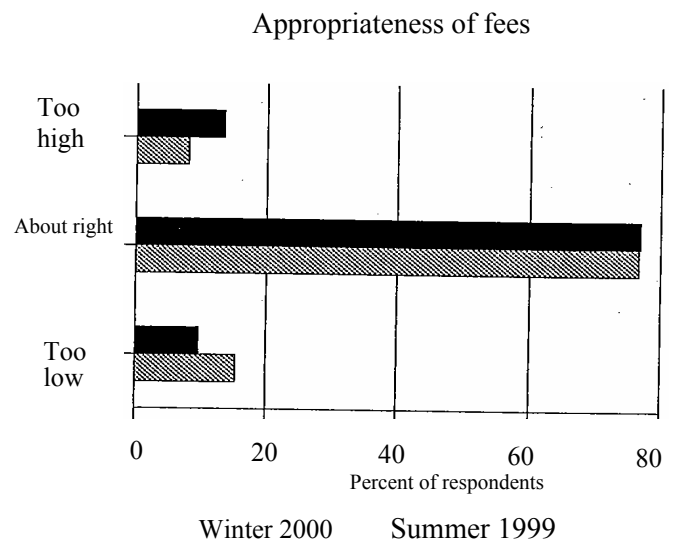


Figure 1. Appropriateness of demonstration fees by winter 2000 and summer 1999 respondents.

Differences in responses concerning the appropriateness of fees between study groups are not statistically significant. Nevertheless, differences between samples are primarily a result of more winter respondents reporting the fee they paid was "too high." Where 13 percent of winter respondents said the fee was "too high," 8 percent reported that way in summer 1999. Compared to 10 percent of winter respondents, 15 percent of summer respondents indicated the fee was "too low."

Winter visitors

The responses to the appropriateness of fees in winter 2000 were consistent among survey respondents regardless of group size, gender, household income, education, or number of previous visits to the park. However, there were statistically significant differences

when considering the activity in which the respondent participated, the purpose for visiting the park, length of stay in the park, and age of the respondent.

For example, respondents that used a snowmobile during their visit to the park more frequently indicated the fee they paid was "too high" (figure 2). Ten percent of respondents engaged in activities that did not involve snowmobiles (skiing, hiking, snowshoeing, walking, sightseeing) reported the fee they paid was "too high" compared to 16 percent of respondents who participated in snowmobiling. More nonsnowmobilers said the fee was "too low."

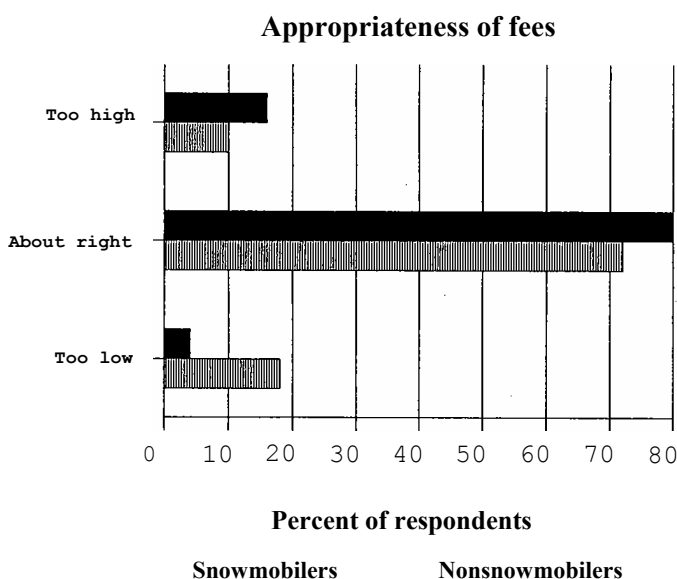


Figure 2. Appropriateness of demonstration fees for winter 2000 respondents, by snowmobilers and nonsnowmobilers.

Nine percent of respondents reporting that visiting the park was the primary purpose their trip away from home stated the fee they paid was "too high." Twenty-two percent of respondents felt that way if their Yellowstone National Park visit was either one of several things they planned to do on their trip or something they decided to do after being in the area.

Winter visitors that stayed in the park less than one day were more critical of the fees than were visitors that stayed two or more days (figure 3). Twenty-four percent of respondents staying for one-day thought the fee they paid was "too high;" 9 percent of respondents staying more than one day felt that way.

Younger winter visitors were more likely to report the fee they paid was "too high" compared to older visitors.

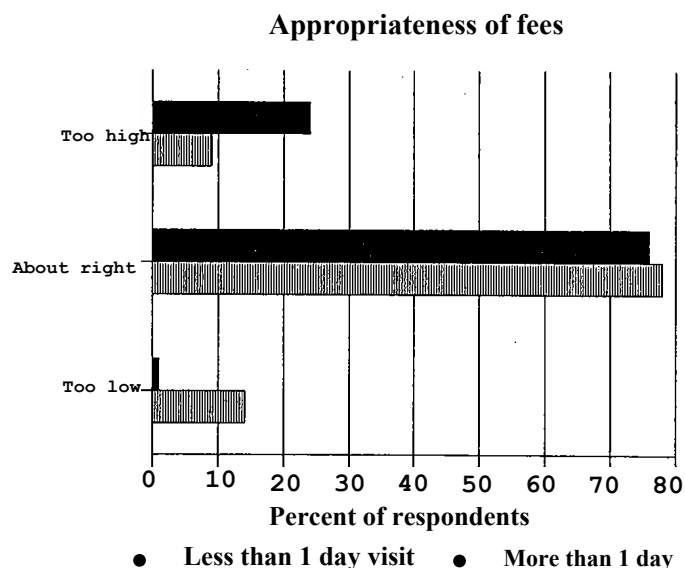


Figure 3. Appropriateness of demonstration fees for winter 2000 respondents, by length of stay in the park.

Twenty-two percent of the respondents between the ages of 18 and 39 thought the fee was "too high" compared to 12 percent of respondents between 40 and 61 years of age and 5 percent of respondents over 61 years of age.

Summer visitors

The responses to the appropriateness of fees in summer 1999 were consistent among survey respondents. This was true regardless of group size, gender, household income, education, age of the respondent, number of previous visits to Yellowstone, or purpose for visiting the park. However, there were statistically significant differences when considering the respondents length of stay.

Summer visitors staying in the park less than one day were more likely to report the fee they paid was "too high" compared to visitors that stayed two or more days. Twenty-five percent of respondents staying for one day thought the fee they paid was "too high;" 6 percent of respondents staying more than one day felt that way. The same pattern existed With Winter respondents (figure 3).

There were Differences between Winter and Summer Respondents

Differences between Winter 2000 and summer 1999 respondents were significant in regard to type of entrance fee paid, purpose of the trip, number of previous visits to the park, income, age, length of stay in the park, and whether respondents were part of a tour group.

For example, the most frequent means of entry for Winter study participants was the \$15 snowmobile fee (40 percent of respondents). Summer respondents most

frequently obtained entry to the park by purchasing a \$20 vehicle pass (65 percent). About an equal number of winter and summer respondents (22 and 25 percent, respectively) used Golden Eagle, Golden Age, or Golden Access passports to gain entry into the park. For 13 percent of winter study participants, the fee they paid was included in their tour package. In comparison, less than one percent of summer respondents indicated the fee they paid was part of a tour package.

The nature of their visit to Yellowstone National Park differed for winter and summer respondents (figure 4). For example, 71 percent of winter study participants, compared to 48 percent of summer study respondents reported their visit to the park was the primary purpose of their trip away from home. In contrast, 51 percent of the summer respondents reported their visit to the park was one of several things they planned to do compared to 25 percent of winter respondents.

One-quarter of winter respondents were visiting the park for the first time compared to 42 percent of summer respondents. Participants in the winter study more frequently reported they had made more than five visits to the park than did summer study respondents (29 percent and 18 percent, respectively).

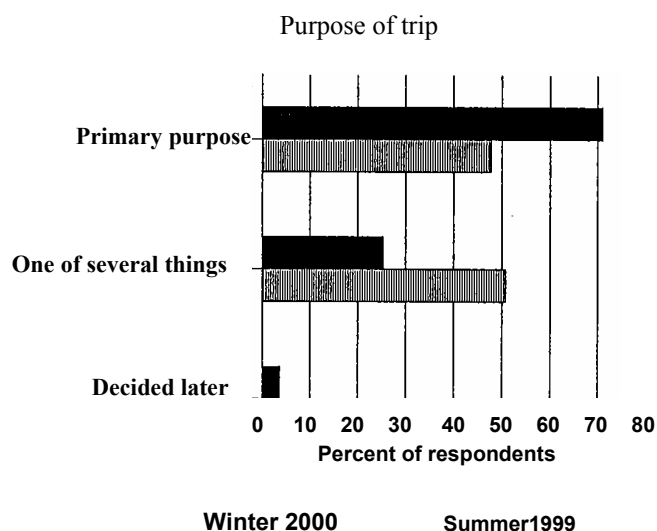


Figure 4. Purpose of trip to Yellowstone National Park, by winter 2000 and summer 1999 respondents.

In addition to having made more visits to the park than summer respondents, winter respondents were more likely to spend less time in the park during their visit. For example, 30 percent of winter respondents spent less than one day in the park compared to 11 percent of respondents in the summer study. Twenty percent of the winter study participants reported staying in the park five

or more days compared to 36 percent of the summer study participants.

Visitors Want the Demonstration Fee Revenue Kept in the Park

When asked how entrance and other fees collected by the NPS should be used, 96 percent of the visitors sampled in winter 2000 preferred either to keep all of the recreation fees collected by the park in the park, or to keep most of it in the park and distribute the rest among other NPS units as needed (figure 5). One percent preferred to keep most of it in the park and return the rest to the US Treasury to be used as Congress directs. These findings are consistent with those from the summer 1999 monitoring effort at Yellowstone.

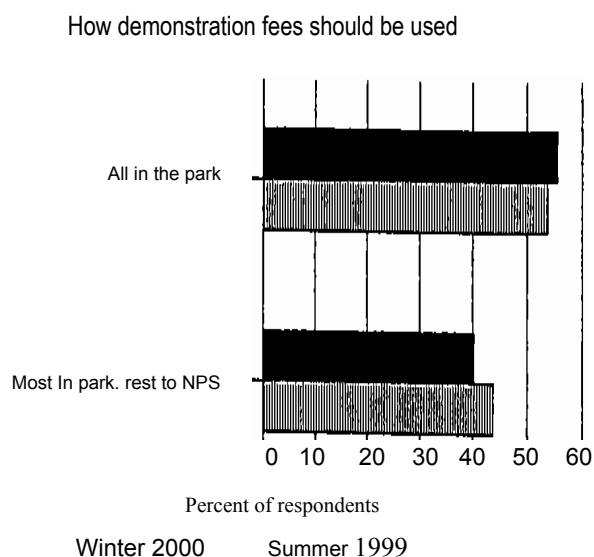


Figure 5. Visitor preference for use of the demonstration fees, by winter 2000 and summer 1999 respondents.

A Final Comment

During the summer 1999 and winter 2000 studies, more than 400 visitors at Yellowstone National Park completed onsite questionnaires concerning their reactions to new or increased fees. These participants represented a diverse group of visitors with respect to gender, age, race or ethnicity, education, income, location of permanent residence, and their use of the park. Despite the diversity, visitor reactions to the fees were strikingly similar for the two study periods. *Park visitors generally indicated strong support for the demonstration fees, provided that all or most of the fees collected remain in Yellowstone National Park or with the NPS to improve visitor services or protect resources, and not be returned to US Treasury.*

While there was general support for the new or increased fees from respondents in both study periods, there were differences in reactions depending on several visitor characteristics. For example, common to both studies was the finding that visitors staying in the park less than one day were more critical of the fees and reported the fee they paid was "too high." This finding is consistent with findings from the broader summer 1999 study in nine national park units nationwide (Lime et al. 1999). Specific to the winter 2000 study, snowmobilers also more frequently indicated the fee they paid was "too high."

Further monitoring of visitor and nonvisitor reactions to changing fees and fee implementation strategies in Yellowstone National Park using a variety of data collection and analysis techniques should help clarify trends and improve our understanding of the implications of fee policies. Data also should be collected to represent visitor reactions throughout the year and all use seasons. In addition to monitoring visitor reactions to fee programs, it would seem invaluable to poll a wide segment of the American public concerning their views regarding fees as well as to analyze historical and continuing NPS data sets at Yellowstone National Park concerning visitor use patterns and visitor characteristics (e.g., from backcountry permits) to help assess factors associated with trends.

Study Methods

A four-page questionnaire was used in Yellowstone National Park to elicit visitor reactions to the demonstration fee program in the park. Questionnaires were distributed to park visitors in winter 2000 using the same procedures as were used to monitor reactions to the fees in summer 1999. The population sampled consisted of visitors to Yellowstone, either traveling with a group or alone, from August 5 through 9, 1999, and February 10 through 14, 2000. Visitors were asked to participate in the voluntary survey by completing an onsite questionnaire. A random sample of visitors was chosen to represent the general visitor population during each sampling period. With the exception of international or other visitors who declined to take part because of language difficulties, more than 95 percent of the visitors contacted agreed to take part in the two surveys. A total of 422 visitors completed the onsite questionnaire; 201 during August 1999 and 221 during February 2000.

Although an attempt was made to include a representative cross-section of visitors, the result of this limited monitoring effort was not intended to represent a crosssection of all visitors to the park. Thus, the survey results should be thought of as pertaining to visitors

during the time the park was monitored and should not be generalized beyond that period. Also, the reactions of those who may have decided *not* to visit the park because of the new or increased recreation fees were not included in this study.

Literature Cited

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About the NPS Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

For more information about the NPS Recreational Fee Demonstration Program, or copies of this summary, contact the National Park Service Recreation Fee Program, Room 7421, 1849 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20240.

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The Cooperative Park Studies Program is a University partnership with the NPS (Midwest Region and Denver Service Center) and Biological Resources Division, US Geological Survey.

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